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## Montgomery volunteer firefighters' report defends role

County disputes claim of savings of more than \$25 million a year

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Montgomery County's volunteer firefighters defended their role in the county's fire and rescue service Tuesday in a report that says they save county taxpayers at least \$25 million a year.

However, those numbers were disputed by members of County Executive Isiah Leggett's (D) administration, who say the volunteers' contribution is inflated.

According to the report, produced by the county's Volunteer Fire-Rescue Association, the county has 865 trained and certified volunteer firefighters, who together save the county \$23.2 million in salary and benefit costs each year. The county says there are nine fewer volunteers.

"The report documents that highly trained volunteer fire and rescue personnel save lives, and save county taxpayers more than \$20 million annually," said Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg. "That's why it's crucial that the County Council provide adequate funding to maintain the ability to sustain and to continue to grow volunteer capacity."

The association's executive director, Eric Bernard, says the report is long overdue.

The county's volunteer firefighters have faced criticism in the past year stemming from their opposition to an ambulance fee proposed by Leggett, who now is seeking to cut their county funding in half.

Bernard has said the proposed cuts would severely weaken the recruitment and training of volunteers.

The association says it expects to save the county \$23.2 million this fiscal year by providing 403,256 hours of volunteer service — the equivalent of 200 full-time paid positions.

The volunteers save the county another \$2.4 million by providing gear, apparatus, equipment and other items, the report states. The association also points out that the county has rent-free use of volunteer fire department facilities, saving millions of dollars.

If the county had to replace the fire engines and other apparatus owned by the volunteers, that would be an additional \$25 million, the report states.

However, county spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield disputed the volunteers' claims, saying the numbers are likely too high.

"Keep in mind that the county would not necessarily choose to replace all (volunteer) purchases," he said. "Germantown volunteers chose to spend \$750,000 on an engine, but don't have any volunteers qualified to drive it a year later."

Lacefield also pointed out that much of that money came from taxpayers in the form of donations.

The county has records for 856 — not 865 — volunteers, Lacefield said. About 300 responded to fewer than 30 calls last year, he added.

The volunteer association says an additional 626 volunteers are being trained.

Lacefield also questioned the association's data on cost-savings, saying that the county expects to spend about \$10.4 million on volunteer-related expenses in fiscal 2011, which ends June 30.

The volunteers also cost the county \$14 million per year by fighting a countywide ambulance fee last year, Lacefield said.

By his calculations, the volunteers actually cost the county money.

However, Bernard questioned Lacefield's math.

"We used their data," he said, referring to county data. "All of our data is sourced. It's well researched."

The county pays active volunteers \$600 per year — expected to total about \$363,000 in the current fiscal year. About \$1.1 million is spent on retirement benefits, which the report states provide about \$2,300 per year for volunteers who served more than 25 years.

Montgomery County has a combined firefighting service composed of about 860 volunteers and 1,038 career firefighters. The service handles about 100,000 emergency calls annually out of 35 fire and rescue stations — most of which are owned by 19 volunteer corporations.

The county's fire and rescue budget in fiscal 2011, which began July 1, is \$182.6 million.